

*Poetry for Reading or Singing? Purcell, Dryden, Dramatic Opera
and the musicality of the Iambic Pentameter*

This paper is the latest in a number given over the last two or three years as part of an intended monograph which will identify the cultural origins and dramaturgical thought behind that uniquely English form of musical theatre, dramatic opera. I refer to works such as *King Arthur* of 1691, *The Fairy Queen* of 1692 and *Rinaldo and Armida* of 1698. Works of their kind held the English stage from at least the early 1670s into the second decade of the 18th century and beyond; and their salient characteristics were that the drama was spoken, the main characters don't sing, music was confined to specific kinds of context and function, and, almost always, theatrical spectacle was an important component.

Often these works were called operas by the English writers of the time.

However, I am fully persuaded that we should use the more critically discriminating term dramatic opera, which, for a concept of opera so distinctive serves as honourably as *opera seria* or *Singspiel*. The term dramatic opera cuts to the heart of the matter because it reaches inside the tension between the two distinct provinces of human nature to which, Dryden and

others declared, theatre can appeal. First is the appeal to the mind through spoken dramatic poetry. Second there is the appeal to the senses offered by music and spectacle. And lest we think this prioritising of the mind was a Dryden obsession, it is worth quoting one of several younger critics who made similar points.

In 1706 John Dennis (1658–1734) published *An ESSAY on the Operas after the Italian Manner, which are about to be establish'd on the English Stage: With some Reflections on the Damage which they may bring to the Publick*.¹

Dennis declares that his attack is

. . . only levell'd against those Operas which are entirely Musical; for those which are Dramatical may be partly defended by the Examples of the Antients.

By contrast, Dennis says, all-sung opera pleases the senses rather than the mind — a bad thing because, if music

¹ For an extensive discussion of these debates in Italy, France and England, see D.T. Mace, 'Musical Humanism, the Doctrine of Rhythmus, and the Saint Cecilia Odes of Dryden', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 27 (1964), 251–292. See also H. Neville Davies, 'Dryden and Vossius: A Reconsideration', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966), 282–295; also D.T. Mace, 'A Reply to Mr. H. Neville Davies's "Dryden and Vossius: A Reconsideration"', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966), 296–310..

presumes not only to degenerate from its antient Severity, from its sacred Solemnity, but to set up for itself, and to grow independent, as it does in our late Operas, it becomes a mere sensual Delight, utterly incapable of informing the Understanding, or reforming the Will.²

The ancient idea that spoken drama can be used as a tool of moral argument and instruction is a recurrent one among those who established the principles of dramatic opera during the last half of the seventeenth century. It lay behind the ideas put forward by William Davenant in 1654, when he wrote *A Proposition for Advancement of Morality By a new way of Entertainment of the People*.³ Just two years later, Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes, Made a Representation by the Art of Prospective in Scenes, and the Story sung in Recitative Musick*, appeared in a private theatre, and appears to have been the first all-sung musical drama to be presented in England — the first English opera, if you like, but not a dramatic opera.

² *The Select Works of Mr. John Dennis. In two volumes.* (London, 1718), Vol. I, 453–454.

³ James R. Jacob & Timothy Raylor, 'Opera and Obedience: Thomas Hobbes and *A Proposition for Advancement of Morality* by Sir William Davenant', *The Seventeenth Century* 6/2 (1991), 205–250, in which *A Proposition* is reprinted.

Davenant's preface includes now-famous comments about his verse that touch on the the moral purposes of the drama, and on the kinds of verse he has had to write in order to accommodate music.

You may inquire, being a Reader, why in an heroick Argument my numbers are so often diversify'd and fall into short fractions; considering that a continuation of the usual length of *English* verse would appear more Heroical in reading. But . . . frequent alterations of measure . . . are necessary to *Recitative* Musick for variation of *Ayres*.⁴

Here is a crucial issue — the distinction between the reader of 'an heroick Argument' and the member of the theatre audience. In *The Siege of Rhodes* the noble moral purposes of 'heroic Argument' are sustained in the discourse between characters; which is written mainly in rhyming pentameters — what has come to be known as heroic couplets. This discourse, it seems, was carried on in recitative — the only musical style that can sustain the pentameter for any length of time. But '*Recitative* Musick' is distinguished from other music by a freer kind of verse. So, for example, the published text

⁴ William Davenant, *The Siege of Rhodes* (London: 1656), Preface. *Early English Books Online* [Accessed 30 September 2012]

of *The Siege* includes long passages of the kind epitomised in your Example 1, written largely in pentameter. It seems almost certain that this was set to recitative. But *The Siege* also includes long sections of freer verse, including passages such as your Example 2, which seems to include a strophic song to be sung by one of the main figures, Alphonso.

There are striking differences between the flexibility shown in *The Siege of Rhodes* and the more codified contrasts seen in the heroic dramas written by Davenant and others both before and after the reestablishment of public theatre in 1660–61. For example, In 1658, two years after *The Siege of Rhodes*, Davenant's *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* explicitly separates music from speech and defines the functions of that separation. Each of the six scenes begins with an introduction on instruments (for example 'a symphony' or 'a doleful pavan'), followed by a 'Speech' made mainly in pentameters by one of the main characters, the speech followed by a 'Song', which typically 'pursues the arguments of the speech', and the entry ends with instrumental music.

Davenant died in 1668, and the next important writer to address these matters with deep critical acumen was his admirer, John Dryden, whose

politically oriented tragi-comedy, *The Spanish Fryar; or, the Double Discovery* was premiered at the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre in 1680. The dedicatory preface to the published text is highly polemical; and in it Dryden argues for a careful reading of his play. It is one of his most lucid expressions of a perspective that was to dominate the last 30 years of his life — that, as Robert D. Hume puts it, 'the insistence that fancy be checked by sense and judgement'⁵; as far as the audience is concerned, that deeper kind of considered judgement is to be found not in the theatre, but by someone reading alone. Dryden acknowledges that, in the theatre, plays are all too easily accepted by the audience; though

. . . it will be found in the second telling: And a judicious Reader will discover in his Closset that trashy stuffe, whose glittering deceiv'd him in the action. [...] In a Play-house everything contributes to impose upon the Judgment; the Lights, the Scenes, the Habits, and, above all, the Grace of Action [...] surprize the Audience, and cast a mist upon their Understanding.⁶

⁵ Robert D. Hume, 'Dryden on Creation: "Imagination" in the Later Criticism', *The Review of English Studies* 21/83 (1970), 295–314, 300

⁶ John Dryden, *The Spanish Fryar; or, the Double Discovery* (London: 1681), The Epistle Dedicatory (unpaginated). *Early English Books Online* [Accessed 18 June 2014]

I am not aware of any statement from this time that so lucidly expresses the difference between the power of verse to be read, and that to be performed in the theatre. Although Dryden does not say so on this occasion, it seems certain that if in the theatre everything visual surprises the audience and casts 'a mist upon their Understanding', music is even more likely to do the same.

We might now consider why the pentameter has been so dominant in serious drama in English, from the 16th century to at least T.S. Eliot in the 20th century. As we do so, we will see firstly that the poetic virtues of pentameter technique are almost opposed to those of verse apt for musical setting, yet secondly that the pentameter's strengths have qualities that are often described in musical terms, both in the techniques used and in the aesthetic effect.

Writing in 1693, in his polemical publication *The Impartial Critick*, John Dennis declared that John Dryden was the greatest master of poetic design, and specifically praises his abilities, first in the unrhymed and then in the rhyming pentameter.

. . . we have nothing to shew, ev'n in Prose, which has a greater purity than some of his blank Verse, and particularly that of the *Spanish Fryar*, (thô at the same time that it has the purity and easiness of Prose, it has the dignity and strength of Poetry) so I cannot imagine any thing more perfect than his Equal Numbers in Heroick Verse, where-ever he design'd them perfect; and in this he will never be exceeded by any Man, unless length of Time makes some strange Alteration in the Tongue.⁷

That contemporary praise for Dryden's perfection in the pentameter is consistent with modern commentaries that explore the aesthetic and technical qualities of the pentameter. For example, the poet and lecturer Robert Burns Shaw identifies in blank verse the

commanding momentum, this sense of ongoingness, that is one of the leading characteristics (and advantages) of blank verse.⁸

⁷ John Dennis, *The Impartial Critick* (London: 1693), unpaginated preface 'A Letter to a Friend'.

⁸ Robert Burns Shaw, *Blank Verse: A Guide to its History and Use*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), 4.

And that ongoingness depends upon technical characteristics that are described in more specifically musical terms by Derek Attridge, who is himself a capable amateur musician:

A crucial feature of five-beat verse is the absence of any strong rhythmic hierarchy. There is no obvious way lines of five beats could divide into half-lines, and since no doubling movement is set up within the line, there is no encouragement to group the lines into pairs or larger units.⁹

It might at first seem as if the rhyming pentameter requires that we modify Attridge's rule. But not so. Although the heroic couplet's end-rhymes have the potential to stop ongoingness, Dryden specifically recognised that a strong poet knows how to turn that danger into a virtue, by having couplet verse exploit the technical and aesthetic qualities offered by enjambment, where meaning and rhythm flow beyond the end of the line.

. . . though, most commonly, the sence is to be confin'd to the
Couplet, yet nothing that does *perpetuo tenore fluere*, run in the same
channel, can please alwayes. 'Tis like the murmuring of a stream,

⁹ Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 162.

which not varying in the fall, causes at first attention, at last drowsiness. Variety of cadences is the best rule, the greatest help to the Actors, and refreshment to the Audience.¹⁰

Attridge points out that the inherently repetitive structure of the four-beat poetry found in nursery rhymes and other dance-like poetry, is foreign to everyday speech; but the pentameter can be shaped into a heightened version of speech. Building persuasively on Attridge's arguments, John R. Cooper demonstrates that the iambic pentameter has unrivaled potential for varied intonation and pacing, that it gives unrivaled freedom to both the poet and the speaker, and that it creates a uniquely 'interpersonal' kind of poetry:

iambic pentameter does imply or perhaps create a different relationship between poet and audience from that implied by four-beat or song.¹¹

This, surely, is part of what Dryden was getting at when he praised the superior aesthetic possibilities of heroic rhyme:

¹⁰ John Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie, An Essay*, (London: Henry Herringman, 1668), 62

¹¹ John R. Cooper, 'Intonation and Iambic Pentameter', *Papers on Language and Literature* 33/4 (1997), 392–421, 412–414, 419

The Plot, the Characters, the Wit, the Passions, the Descriptions, are all exalted above the level of common converse, as high as the imagination of the Poet can carry them, with proportion to verisimilitude. [...] Heroic Rhime is nearest Nature, as being the noblest kind of modern verse.¹²

Especially given the musical styles of the 17th century, setting five-beat lines to music presents problems that call either for ingenious solutions, or for a recitative style. Three 17th-century English settings that are largely or entirely in iambic pentameter will make the point. And it is important to note that all of these use rhyming couplets. For example Orlando Gibbons' famous madrigal *The Silver Swan* sets three couplets, using a declamatory freedom in the upper line that can readily accommodate the problematic poetic pattern.

A second example is from Dryden himself — and we'll listen to part of this. His extraordinarily suggestive poem 'Beneath a Myrtle Shade' from *The Conquest of Granada* (1673), is part of an on-stage entertainment in Act III, Scene I, 'The Zambra Dance'. Its first verse epitomises Dryden's skill at

¹² John Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie*, 66

creating astonishingly fluid verse, with the aid of some superbly timed enjambment. Here, in moving from verse to be declaimed, to verse for singing, Dryden shifts from spoken blank verse to the heroic couplet.

Beneath a myrtle shade,
 Which love for none, but happy lovers made,
 I slept; and straight my love before me brought
 Phyllis, the object of my waking thought.
 Undressed she came my flames to meet,
 While love strewed flowers beneath her feet;
 Flowers which, so pressed by her, became more sweet.

The requirement to provide two characteristics fundamental to this context — dance and song, placed the composer, John Banister (1630/3–1679) in a challenging position. As Ian Spink has observed, the music is 'courant-like'.¹³ In that respect it serves its function; but comfortable with the five-stress lines it is not, for Banister had to devise a phrase structure that sometimes compresses the pacing of words and sometimes stretches it out to fit the patterns of dance; and almost always, it fails to give sufficient recognition to

¹³ Ian Spink, *English Song, Dowland to Purcell* (London: Batsford, 1974), 164.

the enjambments. Dryden's carefully graded punctuation is more or less ignored.

PLAY EXCERPT

I could draw on other examples; but for our purposes here, it is instructive to compare that tension between the poem as read, and as heard in Banister's music, with a song by Purcell — his decisively lyric setting of a series of rhyming pentameters in 'No, No, Poor Suff'ring Heart', from Dryden's very sober 1692 tragedy *Cleomenes, the Spartan-Heroe*. It is perhaps significant that, after all their mutual experience, Dryden should provide Purcell with rhymed verse that has not one enjambment — surely, an accommodation to music, even if the result eschews one of the greatest potential virtues of five-beat poetry designed to be read.

You can see the original verse and Purcell's musical setting in your Example 3. The musical phrases' constant search for different ways of scanning out the five-beat lines creates a combination of sweetness and breathless intensity that admirably fits the dramatic context. The success is a mark of Purcell's

brilliance; but the requisite technical skill and creative imagination demonstrate the pentameter's general unsuitability for lyric setting. As a technique for extended lyrical setting, this is simply unsustainable.

PLAY FIRST VERSE

My argument has many more aspects than can be presented here. But it seems clear enough, from the evidence of the written plays and of critical commentaries by playwrights such as Davenant, Dryden and Dennis, firstly that the pentameter was the unquestioned and unquestionable primary verse form for the 'serious play', partly because it creates a heightened intimacy between actors and audience. Secondly that the pentameter's primacy depends at least as much on its potency for the private reader, as for a listener. Thirdly that the functions of poetry and music within the drama are so different as to be not readily compatible, in that while poetry appeals to the mind and understanding, music is part of a wider appeal to the senses that 'casts a mist upon the[ir] understanding'. And fourthly that the functions of mind and sense can operate in ways that are complementary, but cannot be synthesised simultaneously. As in *The Cruelty of the Spaniards* and in the fully

fledged dramatic operas of later decades, drama and music can achieve a synthesis only across time, when they operate successively, with music either setting the scene for the spoken drama or expressing aspects of it.

I hope that the arguments I have presented here will achieve two things above all. Firstly that they will make a contribution to critical thought by suggesting that there is indeed a coherent dramaturgical concept underlying dramatic opera. Secondly, that the arguments will help drive a few more nails into the intellectually lazy idea that the distinctive nature of dramatic opera is rooted primarily in pandering to the debased taste of the Restoration public.

There is no inevitable contradiction, no inherent conflict in the idea of separating drama and music in order to create a kind of musical theatre that feeds the understanding and the senses. Over the last 40 years or so scholars of theatre and literature such as Richard Lockett, James A. Winn and Dianne Dugaw have done much to open up the possibilities for a more balanced view of Restoration musical theatre as a whole, and of dramatic opera in

particular¹⁴. I hope my arguments will help dispel a perplexity mentioned by Dianne Dugaw, back in 1989. She refers to the difficulties with which most commentators grapple when discussing the role of music on the Restoration stage; and she observes that:

. . . if Restoration playgoers found such an idea of theatre "curious" rather than satisfying and workable, would authors of the calibre of Dryden, Behn, and Congreve have employed it repeatedly? The perplexity then must in fact be ours.¹⁵

Finally I would like to observe that as far as performance is concerned, I am no purist. However, I do hope that this unique relationship between music and drama will become more widely understood and appreciated, if only to encourage directors to present dramatic opera in a plain reading that resists both the egoism of directors' theatre, and the idea that dramatic opera needs to be mended.

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¹⁴ Roger Savage, 'The Shakespeare-Purcell "Fairy Queen": A Defence and Recommendation', *Early Music* 1/4 (1973), 200–221; Richard Lockett, 'Exotick but rational entertainments: the English dramattick operas', in Marie Axton and Richard Williams (eds), *English Drama: Forms and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 123–141, 232–234; Dianne Dugaw, "'Critical Instants": Theatre Songs in the Age of Purcell and Dryden', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23/2 (1989–1990), 157–181; Winn, 'On Heroic Song: A Proposal for a Revised History of English Theater and Opera, 1656–1711', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30/2 (1996/7), 113–137.

¹⁵ Dugaw, 'Critical Instants', 160